

RELIGION IN FREUD'S APPROACH

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Abstract

This article aimed to examine the essence of religion by using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. It looks at the Freud's theories: "the ontogenic" and "the phylogenetic". The origins of religious and belief traditions, as Freud had mapped, are neurosis, precarious future, and religion's masculine roots. Freud's realist approach on religion brought a controversy on the study of religion, i.e., by associating his patients and order cultural phenomena (art, literature, and philosophy). His falsification over religion mad Freud as the most controversial man in his time. For Freud, the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present enquiry. It is enough for us, as Freud asserts that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions.

Key Words: religion, Freud, philosophy, psycho-analysis.

INTRODUCTION

"What is the psychological significance of religious ideas and under what heading are we to classify them?"¹ to quote Sigmund Freud, when he began to explain psychological aspects in religion. He insists that "if we want to find the origin of religion," we need look no further than these grim events and deep psychological tensions." According to Freud, "the birth of belief is to be found in the Oedipus complex," which was divided emotions that "led humanity to its first great crime." Therefore, in "the powerful emotions it produced, we find the origin of religion, as he remarked."²

The classical-based theories of religion, many derived from "psychological or it's analytical and object relations branches," continue to spawn an immense literature. Generally, "interpretative of religion" (as in the case of psychoanalysis), or "interpretative of spirituality" (as in the case of object relations), promises to measurement-based into two ways. First, it "provides hypotheses which can be subjected to measurement-based test." Second, as contending qualitative methodologies, "approaches emerge and influence sociological social psychology."³ For example, every day the mass media report

1 Sigmund Freud, "From The Future of an Illusion" in *Freud and Freudians on Religion: A Reader*, Donald Capps (ed), Yale University, New Haven & London, 2001, p.51.

2 Sigmund Freud, "Religion and Personality" in *Seven Theories of Religion*, Daniel L. Pals, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p.70.

3 Bernard Spilka, et al., *The Psychology of Religion: Empirical Approach*, Third Edition,

instances of religious conflict throughout the world among those who adhere to different faiths. G.W. Alport has said, "The role of religion is paradox. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice." Concurrently, religion is also "inextricably tied to altruistic" and helping "personal behavior."⁴

Furthermore, the call for good theory remains important within the psychology of religion. "Religion," as matter of fact, "is no longer a marginal concern of psychology" as it is forced to confront religious issues. Mainstream psychology will begin to confront religion in terms of its theories, if no other reason than to show the meaningful relevance of psychology to the interests of a culture that supports and in the process seeks guidance from the science, natural, and so on. Some areas, such as transpersonal psychology, blur the boundaries between psychology as a science and as a spiritual discipline.⁵

This paper tries to answer these questions: 1) what is the relationship between religion and personality? 2) How Freud examine religion through psychoanalytic theory? It is focused on to map philosophy of religion through Freud psychoanalysis.

This paper is organized into four sections. First, the discussion recounts biography of Sigmund Freud. The journey of his intellectualism and groundbreaking research is mentioned. Second, it elaborates the psychoanalysis of Freud's theory. In this part, I critically look at the Freud's initiation of "the ontogenic theory" and "the phylogenetic theory". It also looks at the source of religious tradition which had been mapped by Freud. The next section deals with the correlation between religion and personality. Here, I show why Freud doubted and contended the truth of religious beliefs.

SIGMUND FREUD

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856, in a small Moravian town of Freiberg (what is now Czechoslovakia). His given name was Sigismund Schlomo, but he never used this name and definitely adopted the first name, Sigmund in the early 1870s. Jacob Freud, his father, was an impecunious merchant; and Amalia, his mother was very beautiful, self-assertive, and young. Jacob Freud had two sons from his first marriage who were about Amalia's age. One of these half brothers had a son, John who was older than his uncle. Life in Freud's family was intricate enough to puzzle the clever and inquisitive youngster. Inquisitiveness, the natural endowment of children, would provide ample opportunity to satisfy it.⁶

The Guilford Press, New York, 2003, p.538-539.

⁴ G.W. Alport, *"The Nature of Prejudice"*, Addison-Wesley, Cambridge, 1954, p. 444.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Peter Gay, *"Sigmund Freud: A Brief Life"* in *The Future of an Illusion*, WW. Norton

In 1860s, when Sigmund Freud was almost four years, he moved with his family to Vienna. Throughout his school years, he was an outstanding student. Born in a Jewish family, grew and lived in severely oppressed minority in the Roman Catholic town.⁷ In explaining his family's religiosity, he writes:

"My parents were Jews, and I have remained a Jew myself. I have reason to believe that my father's family were settled for a long time of the Rhine (at Cologne), that, as a result of a prosecution of the Jews during the fourteenth or fifteenth century, they fled eastwards, and that, in the course of the nineteenth century, they migrated back from Lithuania through Galicia into German Austrian."⁸

In 1873, Freud entered the University of Vienna. He had planned to study law, but matriculated in the faculty of medicine, intending to embark, not on conventional career as physician, but on philosophical-scientific investigations that might solve some of the great riddles that fascinated him.⁹ And in 1881, he got his medical degree at the University of Vienna, for eight years-three more than the required minimum-to earn his MD, which he received not long before his twenty-fifth birthday.¹⁰

It was during these years of study; Freud became taken with the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, famous for his critique of religion. "Among all philosophers," he said to his friend, "I worship and admire this man the most." Though, he later denied that Feuerbach had had lasting effect on his own thinking. And another significant figure in Freud's life was Ernst Brucke, in whose physiology laboratory Freud was to work for six years. Brucke, for him, was a model of scientific discipline and rectitude and a representative of the movement in science. Freud's work at Brucke's Institute seemed to open up for him the possibility of a theoretical career. Being a competent and brilliant researcher, Freud cultivated the habit of close observation and the congenial stance of scientific skeptic-national reputations, almost all German imports and though-minded positivists who disclaimed metaphysical speculations. After he modified their theories of the mind-he recalled his teachers with unfeigned gratitude.¹¹

In 1885, he won a modest medical scholarship that allows him to travel to

& Company, New York, 1989, p.ix.

⁷ William E. Deal & Timothy K. Beal, *Theory for Religious Studies*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p.3.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "An Anthropological Study" in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 20, 1959, p.7-8.

⁹ William E. Deal & Timothy K. Beal, *Op Cit*.

¹⁰ David M Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic & Contemporary*, Second Edition, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997, p. 262.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

Paris, where he worked under Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) at the Salpetriere hospital. Freud was fascinated with Charcot's work on hysteria, which he treated as a disease. In 1886 Freud began his practice as a physician in Vienna, where his focus was likewise on nervous disorders. It remained his home until 1938, when he was forced to flee Austria for England following the Nazi *Anschluss*.¹² In 1895, Freud managed to analyze fully his own dream. He would employ this dream, known as "Irma's injection," as a model for psychoanalytic, and he planned to publish in his *Interpretations of Dream*, but neither completed nor published, he changed to be *the Project for a Scientific Psychology*. It anticipated some of his fundamental theories.¹³

In 1896, Freud, for the first time, used the term "psychoanalysis." Unfortunately, in October in the same year, his father passed away. The time was "the most important event, and the most poignant loss of a man's life." It supplied a powerful impetus toward psychoanalytic theorizing, stirring him to his unprecedented self-analysis.¹⁴

In 1905, Freud buttressed the structure of psychoanalytic thought with the second pillar of his theory: the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. It outlined perversions and development of man from childhood to puberty. And in the following decades, he enriched the technique of psychoanalysis with three more sophisticated case histories—"Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy"; Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis"; and "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia." And during these years, he also published papers on religion, literature, sexual mores, biography, sculpture, prehistory, and so forth.¹⁵

In 1933, the catastrophe periods came to Freud's life. Hitler was appointed chancellor in Germany, and from then on Austrian Nazis was active. In the morning of March 12, 1938, the Nazis invaded Austria. Then, Freud left to Paris on June 4, welcomed by his former anal sand and loving disciple, Princess Marie Bonaparte. On June 6, he landed in London, preceded by most of his family, "to die in freedom." After completing "*Moses and Monotheism*," he died bravely on September 23, 1939, and asking his physician for a lethal dose of morphine. Sigmund Freud did not believe in personal immortality, but his work lives on.¹⁶

PSYCHOANALYSIS

¹² William E. Deal & Timothy K. Beal, "*Theory for Religious Studies*", Routledge, New York, 2004, p.3.

¹³ Peter Gay, "*Sigmund Freud: A Brief Life*" in *The Future of an Illusion*, WW. Norton & Company, New York, 1989, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Peter Gay, "*Sigmund Freud: A Brief Life*" in *The Future of an Illusion*, WW. Norton & Company, New York, 1989, p. xiv-xv.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

Freud's psychology of religion consists of two distinct though related theories. The first is bearing on the rise of individual piety, namely, **"the ontogenic theory."** He locates, first of all, the origin of individual piety in the experience of infantile helplessness and the longing for protection by the omnipotent father. Because the superego become a substitute for the father and is supposed to be more severe in the male, men are postulated to play the primary role in the shaping of religion, which they then pass on to women. "Religious rituals," for example, is thought by Freud to be "akin to obsessional neurosis." It is said to be "a defensive maneuver against a variety of sexual and egoistic impulses."¹⁷

The second is on the origin of religion in the human beings, or **"the phylogenetic theory."** In fact, a casual glance at the history of religion might tempt us to assume that men are "the originators of the religious traditions." It cannot be denied that almost all the founders of some religions are male: Lao Tzu, Gautama Buddha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad; or the reformers; such as, Martin Luther, Ramakrishna, and Mahatma Gandhi; are also from this sex. And if we quickly look at the more ranks of priests and other religious leaders in any tradition, we again find overwhelmed by a masculine overlooks.¹⁸

Gardner Murphy states that Freud offers us "an epic view of human nature," that is, "a vision in which artistic congruity and power" are even more important than "internal consistency or detailed conformity to a fact."¹⁹ Although, Freud claims that psychoanalysis is based firmly on observation and that it shares the old world-view of positive science. His science-as-epic also has "elements of tragicomedy." On the one hand is the bondage to primordial and destructive passions, over which civilization's victories are the best temporary. On the other hand, the root of all cultural and individual aspiration is in the embarrassingly mundane and muddled preoccupations of early childhood.²⁰

Freud was not simply to banish religious observance from his household. He undertook an analysis of it as well, in the context of his general theory. According to one his familiar statements on the matter, "religion is at bottom nothing but psychology projected into external world."²¹ One may venture to explain the myths, God, evils, immortality, and so on. Precisely, he makes

¹⁷ David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic & Contemporary*, Second Edition, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Danvers, MA, 1997, p.309-313.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Gardner Murphy, "The Current Impact of Freud on American Psychology" in *Freud and the 20th Century*, pp.102-122.

²⁰ David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic & Contemporary*, second Edition, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997, p. 269.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Psychology of Everyday Life" in *Standard Edition*, Volume 6, 1960, p.258-259.

explicit what in the psychological matter is projected.²²

In addition, Freud has made a mapping of the origins of the religious traditions into three main sources,²³ as follows:

○ **Religion as neurosis**

He points to certain parallels between neurotic ceremonials and ritual. Both action, he says, are carried out with scrupulous attention to every detail; they are conducted in isolation from all other activities and brook no interruption; and their neglect is followed by anxiety or guilt. In contrast to neurotic rituals, sacred rites are performed in concert with other community members. Religious ceremonial is meaningful in every detail; whereas the neurotic's private observances seem utterly senseless. Yet, ordinary worshipers give little thought to the significance of the actions they carry out. They may be as unaware as the neurotic of the motives impelling their participation. From this, Freud has concluded that the compulsive rituals of neurotics originate in the repression of a sexual impulse. The formation of a religion, too, seems to be based on the suppression and the renunciation of certain instinctual impulse. Thus, religion, according to him, may be viewed as a universal "obsessional neurosis," just as neurosis may be described as a distorted private religion.

○ **Religion's precarious future**

The second source, the personal origin of religion, receives renewed emphasis in the most widely read of Freud's writings on religion. In his notorious branding of religious as illusion, he did not mean to say that religious persons are necessarily deceived or misled (though he clearly thinks they are). Rather, by means of this epithet he sought to emphasize the preeminent role of human wishes among the motives prompting religious belief and practice. According to him, the personal roots of religiousness lie in the infantile past of the individual, in the periods of terrifying helplessness that were relieved by the mother, the first love object, and later by the protective love of the stronger father.

○ **Religion's masculine roots: sons and fathers**

Although, both sexes experience infantile helplessness, Freud's psychology of religion is clearly centered in-masculine reactivity. It is the male's ambivalent relation with his father, both in his own and in the race's childhood, that lays at the core of religion as Freud views it. According to him, the male sex seems to have taken the lead in the acquisition of religion, morality, and a social sense. And it seems to have been transmitted to women by cross-inheritance.

²² David M. Wuff, *Op Cit.*, p.277.

²³ *Ibid*, p.279-85.

RELIGION AND PERSONALITY

The issues of Freud's personal identification with the religion of his forebears had been a matter of continuing controversy, ranging from suggestions that psychoanalysis was deeply imbedded in the Jewish mystical tradition and was a sort of secularized version of his self-identification as a "godless" or "infidel" Jew are accurate self-appraisals. What is beyond controversy, as his own writings on religion make clear, is Philip Rieff's observation that Freud had the same "analytic attitude" toward religion as toward his patients and other cultural phenomena (art, literature, philosophy, and so forth). This means that Freud approached religion as **realist**. Rieff says, therefore, "to be analytical is to be a realist. It is not required of a realist to be hopeful or hopeless, but only truthful. A strategy that Freud employs in his analytical approach to religion is to draw an analogy between a religious phenomenon and what he has discovered in the clinical setting."²⁴

Freud, furthermore, applies the same test to teachings of religion. When we ask, for example, on what their claim to be believed is founded, we are met with three answers, which harmonize remarkably badly with one another. Firstly, these teachings deserve to be believed because they were already believed by our primal ancestors. Secondly, we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from those same primeval times. Thirdly, it is forbidden to raise the question of their authentication at all. In former days anything so presumptuous was visited with the severest penalties, and even today society looks askance at any attempt to raise the question again.²⁵

Freud states that to assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present enquiry. It is enough for us that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions. But we do not have to conceal the fact that this discovery also strongly influences our attitude to the question which must appear to be the most important of all. We know approximately at what periods and by what kind of men religious doctrines were created. If we, in addition, discover the motives which led to this, our attitude to the problem of religion will undergo a marked displacement. We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. And it would be more remarkable still if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all

²⁴ Donald Capps, *Freud and Freudians on Religion: a Reader*, Yale University, New Haven & London, 2001, p.9-11.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, "From The Future of an Illusion", in *Freud and Freudians on Religion: A Reader*, Donald Capps (ed), Yale University, New Haven & London, 2001, p.52.

these difficult riddles of the universe.²⁶

Generally, social psychology sees the domain of individual differences as having two sub-domains within it.²⁷ These are the realms of cognition, by psychologists divide into: “beliefs and “values,” as follows:

- a. *Beliefs.* To make sense of people's personal experience, we know what they consider is their belief. For instance, the ideas of God did (or did not) create the world. Beliefs provide information about the physical and psychological surroundings to which people must adapt. And beliefs here solely as cognitive constructs. They do not contain emotions such as liking or disliking. The saying “the devil believes in God and shudders” shows the distinction between a belief and understanding the implication of that belief. It also suggests possible approval of that belief.
- b. *Values.* Those values are cognitive construct of the good, and consist of the ideals, principles, and moral obligation held by a personal or group. To consider values broadens the definition of beliefs beyond the criterion of apparent truth. And values differ from beliefs in that they motivational, which beliefs, in and of themselves, are not. Values acquire motivation when the observed belief describing “what is” differs from the valued situation of “what should be.”

Specifically, it would be true for personal decisions as to whether positive or negative event outcomes are a result of their own actions or those of others; are due to fate, luck, or chance; or are attributable to the involvement of God.

²⁸ Furthermore, psychologists divide the individual characteristics may be termed “dispositional,” and these fall into three categories:

- a. *Background factors.* It is a truism to state that people are largely products of their environment. The overwhelming majority of us are opposed early in life to religious teachings at home and by our peers and adults in schools, churches, mosques, temples, and communities. It is commonly believed that the stronger a person's spiritual background, the greater the chance that the person will have intense religious experiences and undergo conversion.
- b. *Cognitive/linguistic factors.* There is a reason to believe that the presence of a language designates an experience as religious instead of aesthetic or some other possibility.
- c. *Personality/attitudinal factors.* It is a wide variety of dispositional factors that

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, “From The Future of an Illusion”, in *Freud and Freudians on Religion: A Reader*, Donald Capps (ed), Yale University, New Haven & London, 2001, p.57.

²⁷ Bernard Spilka, et al., *The Psychology of Religion: Empirical Approach*, Third Edition, The Guilford Press, New York, 2003, p.34-36.

²⁸ Bernard Spilka, et al., *The Psychology of Religion: Empirical Approach*, Third Edition, The Guilford Press, New York, 2003, p.45-46.

almost seem to defy classification. The “multivariate-motivation theory of religiousness” in an effort to integrate the often scattered ideas and research notions that associate traits and attitudes with religion.

- d. Self-esteem. It does not stand by itself. It is enmeshed in a complex of overlapping personality traits and religious concepts and measures, such as sin and guilt, as well as the nature of religious tradition.*
- e. Locus of control. Although belief in supernaturalism affiliates with external control, people who are more involved in religious activities perceive themselves as having more control over what happens to them.²⁹*

In addition, Winnicott states that the qualities of the God-representation and their relationship to the believer's self-representation become immediate. The God he prays to is not ultimately the God of the theologians or of the philosophers, nor is this God likely to be in any sense directly reconcilable with the God of Scripture. Rather, the individual believer prays to a God who is represented by the highly personalized transitional object representation in his inner, private, personally idiosyncratic belief system. Thus, all the unconscious and preconscious as well as conscious and reflective elements of the individual's relationship to God and the characteristics of his God-representation come into play. These may include elements that are more consciously mature and self-reflective but also elements that stem from earlier developmental levels and have a more infantile, dependent, and even narcissistic quality. One might say that in prayer the individual figuratively enters the transitional space where he meets his God-representation. Prayer thus can become a channel for expressing what is most unique, profound, and personal in individual psychology. All the elements of transference that have become familiar to psychoanalysts can enter into the prayer experience and come to shape the individual's experience both of God and of himself in its context. Indeed, a great deal more can and should be said about the psychology of prayer, but our purpose here is only to indicate the extent to which it shares in the quality of transitional experience and expresses another aspect of the illusory dimension of religious experience.³⁰

In the introduction to *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud makes an important point:

“...in past ages in spite of their incontrovertible lack of authenticity, religious ideas have exercised the strongest possible influence of mankind.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ W.W. Meissner, “Transitional Phenomena in Religion”, in *Freud and Freudians on Religion: A Reader*, Donald Capps (Ed), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2001, p.224.

This is a fresh psychological problem. We must ask where the inner force of those doctrines lies and to what they owe their efficacy, independent as it is, of the acknowledgement.” (p.51)

Clearly, Freud assumed that religion is false. Therefore, he asked why people are religious when it is irrational to be so. It is because they believe in nothing that is real; there must be other foundations for these beliefs. In his history, religion is reduced to infantile projection of the parental figure, a form of neuroticism.³¹ In addition to beliefs, motivations found in affect and values may be important bases of religiosity, proponents of faiths have always held that these faiths are helpful because they encourage people to come to them for extrinsic gratifications, such as solving personal problems or developing a clear set of moral values. These are very important reasons why people turn to religion.

Furthermore, Freud interpreted the God's image as “a father figure”, a kind of projection of one's real father in the context of the resolution of the Oedipus complex. There is some projection of one's early father into one's God image, but he felt that archetypes, i.e., images/symbols with biological roots, also play a role in concepts of God. Although such analytic theories of the origins and development of a God image are difficult to test directly, psychologists suggest that there should be a firm links how children see their real fathers and their images of God.³²

Freud, furthermore, argued that religious *beliefs* are **illusory**-the product of wishes-rather than responses to the reality of the world. Although, later on he respond to a criticism of Roman Rolland that he only focused upon religious belief and had underestimated the value of religious *experience*. Rolland found the essence religion is in what he termed “the oceanic feeling,” was a state of unity with the world. Freud, in this case, responded in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that “this *feeling* is not originally religious,” but later becomes “attached to religious beliefs.” According to him, the actual “oceanic feeling” is only a recollection of an infantile state, perhaps of unity with the mother. Thus, mysticism is a regression to an earlier infantile state. For him, mystical experience does not provide evidence for “unity with the world or even with God;” it is simply a feeling attached to religious beliefs that God exists and can be experienced. “The religious beliefs themselves are not simply illusion, but delusional as well,” he added. In short, Freud was one of the first theorists who argued that there is no essential relationship between mystical experience and religious beliefs.³³

31 Bernard Spilka, et al., *Op cit*, p.48-49.

32 Bernard Spilka, et al., *Op cit*, p.86.

33 *Ibid*, p.296.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of applying psychoanalysis theory of religious phenomena depends on interpreter's fundamental attitude toward religion. If we assume from the outset that religion has no objective validity, that it is in no way points to a transcendent reality, we will probably conclude that religious experience, ideas, and rituals are simply a product of human needs and desires. If we perceive behind the panoply of religious phenomena, a reality larger than human invention, we may see psychoanalysis as a means by which to comprehend the extraordinary variety of responses to the transcendent. Thus, it could become a means for purifying and deepening religious faith.

Although Freud, as a therapist, would naturally be interested in the religiousness apparent in personal lives, it was larger question of religion's origin in the human race that was of consuming interest to him. The bulk of Freud's work in the psychology of religion is directed to this problem. And finally, Freud has pointed the certain parallels between neurotic ceremonials and religious rituals.

As Freud argues that religious *beliefs* are illusory rather than responses to the reality of the world. Although, later on he respond to a criticism that he only focused upon religious belief and had underestimated the value of religious *experience*. According to him, the actual oceanic feeling is only a recollection of an infantile state, perhaps of unity with the mother. Thus, mysticism, or say religion is a regression to an earlier infantile state. For him, mystical experience is simply a feeling attached to religious beliefs that God exists and can be experienced. The religious beliefs themselves are not simply illusion, but delusional as well.

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